



John Ross was born on 24 November 1834 at Gerston, near Halkirk, Caithness, Scotland, the son of a tenant-miller and his wife Janet (nee Sutherland). After education at parish schools, John was apprenticed to a general merchant in Lybster, subsequently working for merchants in Thurso and then Golspie, where he became softgoods manager for the brothers William and Robert Begg, traveling to Glasgow, Edinburgh and London.

Offered a partnership in the brothers' recently established Dunedin business Ross sailed for Otago in 1861 on the *Velore* with 3000 pounds worth of goods. The partnership did not eventuate, and he disposed of the goods profitably and joined [Robert] Begg, Christie and Co, general drapers in Princess Street.

Within a year he had bought out the other partners and taken into partnership Robert Glendinging. Ross's capital contribution was almost 2000 pounds and Glendinging's 1500 pounds. Their initial prosperity may have owed something to Ross's heroism in rescuing survivors from *The Pride of the Yarra*, which sank in Otago Harbour on 4 July 1863.

In 1866 the retail side of the business was sold to three of their salesmen, becoming Brown, Ewing & Co. The wholesale business was established in Stafford Street [it is still there today], importing and distributing softgoods.

On 1 July 1870 Ross married Margaret Watson Cassels, a tailor's daughter who had emigrated with her family in 1857. They immediately left for London, where Ross opened a permanent office, remaining there until 1902, with frequent returns, leaving Glendining as the local managing partner. They had six children, three sons – John [later Sir John] Sutherland, Thomas and Walter, and three daughters – Jessie, Mary, and Zealandia. The sons all entered the family business.

In 1879, with the construction of the Roslyn Mills in the Kaikorai Valley [building is still there today], the firm began manufacturing hosiery, and then worsted and woolen goods. In 1877, the first of five sheep stations, Romarua, was taken up, followed by Lauder, Home Hill, Barewood and Blackstone Hill, to ensure a supply of merino wool. In 1900 the partnership became a limited liability company, Ross & Glendining Limited, with a capital of 500,000 pounds, but remained essentially a family firm.

After Glendining died in 1917, the company was reconstructed with a capital of 1,250,000 pounds. At the time of Sir John's death in Dunedin on 5 January 1927, five years after he was knighted for his services to industry and the community, the firm employed over 1,500 with branches in all the main centres and was one of the largest concerns in New Zealand. His estate was valued at 280,000 pounds.

Sir John and Lady Ross exemplified the notion that great wealth carries commensurate social responsibilities. The workers at the Roslyn Mills were paid union rates, they benefited from profit-sharing schemes, and a cafeteria was provided. Devout church people – John Ross read the Bible daily – the Rosses were notable benefactors of the Presbyterian Church, including gifts of well over 20,000 pounds to Knox College, and 5,000 pounds towards the home for the aged which now bears their name. The YMCA and YWCA also benefited substantially. John Ross served on the councils of both Otago University and Knox College, and on the Otago High Schools' Board. In his home town of Halkirk he endowed the Ross Institute to support local education. His wife Margaret contributed similarly to the community, serving on the national committee of the Plunkett Society 1907-34. With Mrs. R.W. Gibbs she raised the greater part of the money to build St. Margaret's College. Sir John and Lady Ross are jointly celebrated by the Ross Fellowship at Knox College, which was endowed by members of the family for their 50th wedding anniversary in 1920.